

STATEMENT BY  
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BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIITARY CONSTRUCTION AND  
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON MILITARY FAMILY QUALITY OF LIFE

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Introduction:

Chairman Edwards, Congressman Wamp, and Members of the subcommittee, on behalf of our Chairman, General (Ret.) Ben Griffin and our Military Child Education Coalition Board of Directors, thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss critically important aspects of military family quality of life. I am Dr. Mary Keller, the President/CEO of the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), a global network of professionals and volunteers dedicated to Military Children.

The Military Child Education Coalition is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization focused exclusively on the well-being and needs of America's two million military-connected children, specifically in the areas of academic opportunity and excellence, school transition support, and developmental needs. The name of our organization and its focus on the word "child" is intentional because our goal is to ensure that every military-connected child grow and thrive through good and challenging times so that they are college-, work place-, and ultimately, life-ready. The MCEC strives to honor the service of the brave men and women of the U.S. military who serve our nation by taking care of and advocating on behalf of their most prized possession: their children.

Let me start by telling you a little about the demographics of military-connected children: there are about two million children of which 1.1 million are school-aged, with 75% below age 12. Eighty percent attend U.S. public schools, and roughly eight percent are enrolled in Department of Defense Education Activity schools. The rest attend private, parochial, or host nation schools, or are homeschooled.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, based on this significant population, you are asking the right question, "How are military kids doing after almost nine years of war?" Based on our experience in the field, research and surveys, we know a little but not enough. What we do know is first and foremost that babies, toddlers, school-aged children, and young adults are kids first and military-connected second. Sometimes, they are afraid and anxious about the well-being of their parents, both the one deployed and the one at home. While aware of the challenges in their life, they are patriotic and proud of their family. Like any kids, they experience stress differently. Most apparent for military kids is the added factor of deployment-related stress and, sometimes, the "new normal" of a parent who returns profoundly changed.

Through all the challenges, military kids remain adaptable, eager, and flexible. Some are more resilient than others. And they are remarkably strong and perceptive. Shannon – a fourth grader – epitomizes their insight:

*"Life as a military kid is not ordinary. Even though there are struggles, there are also rewards. I have a lot to be thankful for. I am proud to be a military kid, and I am proud of my father. Friends and family; tough times, and change are what make me who I am."*

## **About the Military Child Education**

Fourteen years ago, at the kitchen table of General Tom and Sandy Schwartz' on Fort Hood, the Military Child Education Coalition was founded out of concern about the education and school transition needs of the military-connected student. Then, the focus was on the children of parents serving on Active Duty, recognizing that they move and change schools three times more often than their civilian classmates. After September 11, 2001, we expanded our mission quickly and appropriately to include the children of the National Guard and Reserves. Today we continue to extend our reach as necessary, and provide assistance to the siblings of service members, as well as to the children of Veterans.

From that humble start, we have grown to become a global non-profit organization. Our coalition membership includes all components of the Armed Services, including the Coast Guard, school systems around the world, parents, organizations and corporations, as well as individuals. The MCEC is committed to a grass roots approach. We collaborate actively with the military, educators and community members as well as with leaders at the federal, state and local levels. In addition to the Departments of Defense and Education, we work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Gallup Corporation, Bob Woodruff Foundation, Sesame Workshop, Zero to Three, Survivor Corps, Leader to Leader, America's Promise, USAA Foundation and the USAA Education Foundation, and the Association of the United States Army, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation, the PTA, and a number of universities.

Funding is provided through an active membership base, private donations, and grants from local, state, and foundation sources. Likewise, we have contracts with the Army, Navy and the Department of Defense. In 2007, we were honored to receive funding from Congress that enabled us to scale-up our services especially in communities where children of the National Guard and Reserve are located through the program *Living in the New Normal: Helping Children Thrive through Good and Challenging Times*. Thank you for providing the resources. In addition to these programs, MCEC sponsors 20 other initiatives directed at increasing the network of informed, first responders who support our military connected children to meet their educational goals, mitigate challenges and provide for their well-being.

## **What We Do and How We Do It**

As any teacher will tell you, there are three major influencers/socializers in every child's life: home, school, and friends and caring adults. Attuned to the developmental needs of children, the MCEC's programs, resources and volunteers operate through these three dimensions.

Home and Family: Providing parents with training and knowledge about their kid's challenges is vital. The primary delivery for our outreach to parents is through the Parent to Parent program where we employ and train spouses as peer trainers in child literacy. Through our partnership with the Army, as of March 2010, the MCEC's Parent to Parent teams have trained over 70,000 parents to be positive advocates for their children. Recently, OSD engaged us to expand the P2P program to families of the National Guard and Reserve.

Student Programs and School-Based Support: Especially for middle and high school students, the school is their community and kids are their peers. Providing effective "convoys of support" for adolescents and

teens means enlisting and training those peers. Therefore, we created the Student to Student (S2S) and Junior Student to Student (JS2S) programs. The kids and adults in these programs are trained and provided with curricula and products that help new students assimilate quickly and/or support students going through a challenging time. The goal of S2S and JS2S is 100% acceptance of all new students. Currently there are 130 JS2S middle schools and the 224 S2S high schools around the world. Listen to the words of Craig Miller, a faculty sponsor of the exemplary Student to Student program at Steilacoom High School in Washington State, who shared:

*“The S2S (Student to Student) program is designed to aid incoming new students, specifically to help them adapt and feel comfortable in their new environment. Steilacoom High School is a relatively small school. When we started the program, we had around 700 students enrolled (9-12), we now have about 840. My S2S team members have worked with nearly 600 new students in the four years we have had our program. We get a lot of turnover here. Nearly 48% of our students (district-wide) are from military families. We are located next to Fort Lewis and we are also near McChord AFB. We get students whose parents are stationed at both.”*

Professional, Caring Adults: It is critically important that adults be trained to understand the unique circumstances of military kids, and have the resources to respond appropriately. To assist in these areas, MCEC offers graduate-level, accredited professional development courses. To date we have trained over 16,000 professional educators and community professionals in both the military and civilian systems. This is especially significant when you consider that most of the school counselors, administrators, and other professional educators that have taken advantage of our graduate level training directly engage with students and their parents on a daily basis. Two examples of our array of professional development courses are *Supporting Children of the National Guard and Reserve*, a program which trains school professionals about the unique needs of children whose parents serve in the Reserve components, and *Living in the New Normal*, a program that develops resilience, child development, risk protection, as well as explores factors that may compound the challenges of a separation from a deployed parent. Utilizing public engagements as a delivery method, LINN provides specific strategies and actions that lay people can implement in their own communities.

In all of our professional development courses, the voice of the child is foremost. Recently we heard from a sixth grader who shared these reflections about her dad who had just returned from a second deployment:

*It’s hectic. Preparing...When he finally comes home, it’s really happy times, but then you have to kind of get him rehabilitated, I shouldn’t say (laughing), to getting used to coming back and getting the schedules after fixing around everyone. So it takes some time to get used to.*

### **What We Have Learned and How We Know It**

Our best source of lessons-learned comes from the field. Every day, we learn from children, youth, parents, educators, other professionals, military and civilian leaders, and caring volunteers. Every day, we are humbled and inspired, and urged on by their dedication.

Research and scientifically- based evidence informs and shapes our programs. MCEC’s Science Advisory Board is made up of well-respected military and civilian professionals in the fields of psychiatry, education, pediatrics, psychology, applied mathematics, public policy, anthropology, and philosophy.

The MCEC’s standards of research-to-inform-practice also hold true for us as well as our research-based partnerships. For example, the Army asked us to do the first Secondary Education Transition Study in 2001. The insights gathered in that study (SETS, 2001) resulted in over 400 school systems signing Memorandum of Agreement that allow transitioning students to hand carry school records and for more flexibility in providing access to school programs. The SETS findings, and the resulting Guiding Principles, provided the foundation for the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children which 29 states have enacted.

Last year, General George Casey asked us to update SETS with a broader spectrum of inquiry into such experiences for children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. With findings due this coming fall, the Education of the Military Child-21<sup>st</sup> Century research initiative will include over 1300 in-depth interviews of school administrators, educators, Army personnel, parents, and children (grades 5-12). It is being conducted at 11 installations and includes the National Guard and Army Reserve. The EMC-21 has four areas of inquiry:

- *An update of the Secondary Education Transition Study (SETS). What factors and new options impact today’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade-12<sup>th</sup> grade school transitions?*
- *Enrichment Programs. Are gifted and talented enrichment programs accessible to military-connected kids and do they respond to the transition challenges?*
- *Homeschooling choices, implications and transition challenges for Army Families. Why do families make that choice? How do they carry out the task? What expectations do they have for their children’s outcomes? How does transition affects home-schooled students. How do military service components support the families decision?*
- *The education-related effects of multiple deployments on school-aged children. Looking at children in grades one through twelve, what are the range of school-related issues associated with the repeated deployments of a parent.*

In addition to EMC21, we are excited to receive the results of research conducted in collaboration with the Gallup Corporation and America’s Promise. The Gallup Student Poll, available at no cost, is a 20-item measure of hope, engagement, and well-being. *The poll results in a campus climate profile. We added questions to the GSP that would speak to the hearts and minds of military-connected kids. Of the more than 246,682 students in grades 5-12 that responded to the October 2009 survey, some 25,000 students identified themselves as military-connected. Of those 25,000 students, 17,428 (7.1%) reported a parent deployed in last eight years, 10,897 (4.4%) reported a sibling deployed in last eight years, 2,736 (1.1%) reported both a parent and a sibling deployed in last 8 years.*

Though we continue to analyze the results, preliminary evidence supports the notion that recurring deployments are having detrimental effects. We are grateful that the Bob Woodruff Foundation has

provided the funding necessary to analyze the results in detail, so that we clearly understand and report upon the impacts of recurring deployments.

### **What More Needs to Be Done?**

Consider this: A student who was a first grader in 2001 is now in high school. If that student is a military-connected child, the chances that a parent has been deployed up to three times are high. For that child and family, lost time with a parent cannot be replaced. Likewise, the cumulative effects of anxiety that accompanies those separations and disruptions cannot be removed. For those reasons, we believe the military child is America's child, and we owe their parents a debt of gratitude for their service. This is best said in the words of a ten year old: "Dad, you have been gone half my life."

To repay that debt, Congress, the Department of Defense and the military service branches have made tremendous advances and improvements in family readiness programs and in providing quality services. Today, more family programs are available than ever in the past. We are encouraged by the President's budget request and commend the Administration and service components for providing important elements of support for our military families.

While we do know much about these children and about their needs—**we do not know enough**. We believe the time is right to review current programs, measure their effectiveness and outputs, and determine whether gaps exist. Based on our research and experience, MCEC provides five recommendations:

First, MCEC and our fellow stakeholders believe we have an obligation to our Service Members to ensure that conditions are set that ensure their children are college and work place ready. Especially while deployed, service members should have no doubt that their children are supported with efficacious school programs and environments that ensure their success.

Second, we need more precise information about how military connected kids are doing in school. With that information, we can create programs and practices that respond in thoughtful ways to the complexities of life for military families. Right now, too much of what is said about military kids is a product of sweeping or inaccurate generalizations. Conversely, we may be missing important patterns and experiences that can inform teachers, curricula and other important influencers.

Third, military-connected kids require inclusive solutions that adapt to their changing environments and needs. These solutions must be respectful and supportive of parents, cognizant of the developmental levels of children, tailored to unique environments and situations, and adaptive to changing needs. Ultimately each child deserves to be surrounded by supportive peers and adults that can encourage them to grow in competence, confidence, and coping skills. Likewise, they need the appreciation of a teacher, coach, or friend that reinforces the exemplary values manifest in the military culture and family.

Fourth, effective, consistent communication about programs is vital so parent can make informed decisions about the availability and efficacy of resources available to assist them deal with deployments, trauma and loss. This challenge is amplified for between 10-14% of military-connected children who have special needs. They suffer from a paradox of choice. Making the correct, informed choice depends on good training and advocacy. Regardless of the vehicle, the messaging should be consistent and the choices trustworthy.

Fifth, we must improve the tenuous network available to children of widely dispersed National Guard and Reserve families. Erica, whose dad is a Senior MSGT in the 193<sup>rd</sup> Special Operations Wing from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, wrote:

*“None of my friends, teachers, or even community knows what it is like when my dad is deployed, something that is very hard to explain.”*

Her comments articulate the need to increase the community’s awareness about all military children and adopt measures to fill gaps.

Most fragile of all are the children of veterans and survivors, especially those veterans with physical or behavioral challenges. We cannot ignore these children. Typically, they make the toughest transition when they disconnect from the military environment, moving back into purely civilian environments.

### **Addressing the Gaps in Order to Improve Decisions Concerning the Well-Being of Children**

One of our MCEC founding fathers and past chairman of the board, General (Retired) Tom Schwartz, has always cautioned against making promises to kids that we cannot keep. Children deserve promises that yield consistently what is appropriate, personal, and precise. Likewise, parents deserve good information about reliable options for the well-being and academic success of their child. Earlier in my testimony, I said that we know a lot about military-connected kids, but not enough. To overcome the challenges of a generation of children raised in an era of persistent conflict, we need better, more precise information about their development, to provide informed decisions in order to support them, their parents and professionals who work with them.

As it stands now we have insufficient information, beyond anecdotal stories and examples, about the academic life of military-connected children. We don’t know where these children attend school or how they are performing on such important indicators as academic progress, attendance, special programs, and the implications on the long term for the college, workplace, and life readiness.

Shockingly, there is no public school-based information about military children; nor is there any state or national information. Absent this information, leaders—and more importantly—parents are guessing about important decisions related to their children. Like other cohort groups of public school children, such as children in special education programs, children of poverty, and those who speak a language other than English, data about military connected children should be collected and studied in order to understand their amplified need for attention from educators and special program supports.

The challenge is daunting, but it must be met. Using applied research methodologies, this data can be collected and translated into reliable indicators that will inform thoughtful strategies, processes, and instructional practices that have a likelihood of making a real difference for children. Properly constructed, the data can divulge a deeper understanding of what is needed for children of different ages, in a variety of situations, in classrooms and schools settings, and educators and influencers will become more confident about how best to serve military children with complex challenges.

To this end, MCEC and our partners are collaborating with the United States Department of Education and the Department of Defense to explore constructive ways to use existing capacities to establish reliable, consistent, and sustainable data processes that include all school-aged military-connected students of the Active Duty, Guard and Reserves. This data will provide precision to know and monitor basic and essential questions: How are the kids doing in the schools they attend? What programs and practices are working—and under what conditions?

From these practices, we can construct models that are scalable, can be customized without loss of integrity in execution, and have measurable outcomes. With pervasive conflict into the foreseeable future – and family impacts that will last a generation after the conclusion of any military engagement – it is critical that we establish these measurement systems now.

In addition to answers to the above questions, data collection and analysis has other advantages:

- 1) DOD and the Services will gain a better understanding about how to coordinate and assess their youth programs. With 75-80% of military families living off the installation and children spending the vast majority of their time outside of home and in the school environment, it is essential that local partnerships have good data in order to better measure and align their programs.
- 2) Schools and communities will be better able to evaluate their programs for replication and efficacy. Pattern discernment, over time, can be used to help inform programs beyond the school setting such as after school and summer programs as well as those available through the military systems both on installation and through the Guard and Reserves.
- 3) Indicators can be developed that improve the confidence in the array of systems, supports, and tools that require funding. Without this consistent, child-based, information as an important dimension it may be unclear as to which efforts should be retained when resources diminish.
- 4) Local schools, communities and military installations can identify available programs, measure success and institutionalize those that work. From that inventory, information can be synchronized so parents moving into the area are well informed about options and opportunities that exist for the benefit of their children.
- 5) Frankly, better data will reduce the viral spread of disconnected programs that crowd out what should be spotlighted, added, or phased out. This confusion—termed the “paradox of choice”—adds to the stress parents and caregivers experience. To reduce this stress, precise data will enable professionals to develop programs that allow for a personal, more reliable approach, which is especially

necessary for parents of children with special needs as they attempt to interpret different levels of service and, what are too often, frustratingly inconsistent resources.

6) All too often, the burden of the “too much” can miss the mark of what is actually needed by real kids, in real schools, in local communities—especially given the hectic pace of family life. Better understanding of the challenges of the military child at school can bolster the trust and confidence of parents, commander, and professionals; uncertainty can be alleviated by communicating to parents, commanders, and professionals.

7) Identifying indicators and developing practices and programs targeted at military-children can be applied effectively to other highly mobile children, for example, children of migrant workers and other seasonal workers.

8) Finally and perhaps most importantly, ensuring successful programs and mechanisms that support the family and children of service members is vital because, one day, these children will decide whether they want to join the service. Their experience today could affect the decisions of tomorrow. Given that about 50% of the all-volunteer force is from the children of service members, this support becomes essential to the nation’s efforts to retain an all-volunteer, professional force.

## **Conclusion**

When asked about how military-connected children are doing today, based on all the challenges they face, our answers are, unfortunately, anecdotal...and our kids deserve much more. So do their parents. Therefore, we ask you to consider developing a method that allows for access to information, study of it and synthesis into programs that address gaps through more thoughtful discernment.

This course of action is necessary beyond the current conflicts because our military will deploy whether to war, peacekeeping, or disaster relief. Even without any deployments, military families will move multiple times to different schools that have different rules, standards and options. These eventualities and realities must be addressed so military-connected kids can be kids. Like us, they have a job which is to learn, grow, and make healthy choices. They rely on their parents and teachers who, in turn, rely on all of us who care. By capturing the lessons now and building effective networks of care, we can make a true, sustainable difference...*for the sake of the child.*